

Early Settlement of Otaki Forks Tararua State Forest Park



We are well aware that our information in this booklet is sketchy or perhaps not wholly correct, and we would welcome your assistance in remedying this.

If you have information about the history of Otaki Forks that you would like to contribute please contact:

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Phone: Manakau 655

or

N Z Forest Service, P O Box 191, Masterton
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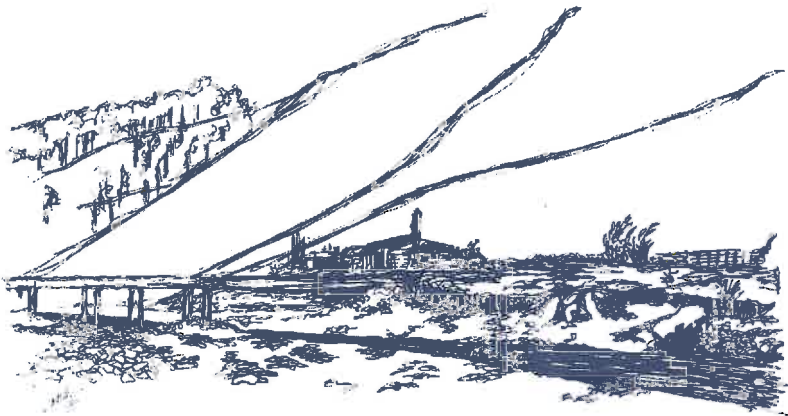
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N Z Forest Service, P O Box 637, Palmerston North
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OTAKI FORKS

Stand at the Forks and look around. All this land that you can see, and much more was owned by the Manawatu Railway Company and was covered in bush containing large rimu and rata trees. In 1878 the company subdivided the land into 700-800 acre blocks and offered it for sale at eight shillings an acre. The horse track through the Gorge to the Forks was completed in 1893 and by 1906 the settlers were clearing their farms and discovering the difficulties that would lie ahead of them.

The initial hardship the settlers faced was the very nature of their farms, which were densely bush clad and completely isolated from other settlements. The settlers aimed to clear the land as quickly as possible. Undergrowth cut during the winter was fired during summer weather. The task of clearing the farms was complicated by the severe climatic conditions experienced at the Forks. After every storm there were washouts, slips and bridges to repair, thus delaying the transportation of materials and manpower. The isolation, geography, and climatic conditions further magnified the hardships the settlers faced during the 1920's depression and the Great Depression of the 1930's. The small settlement was also affected by the loss of men during the two World Wars.

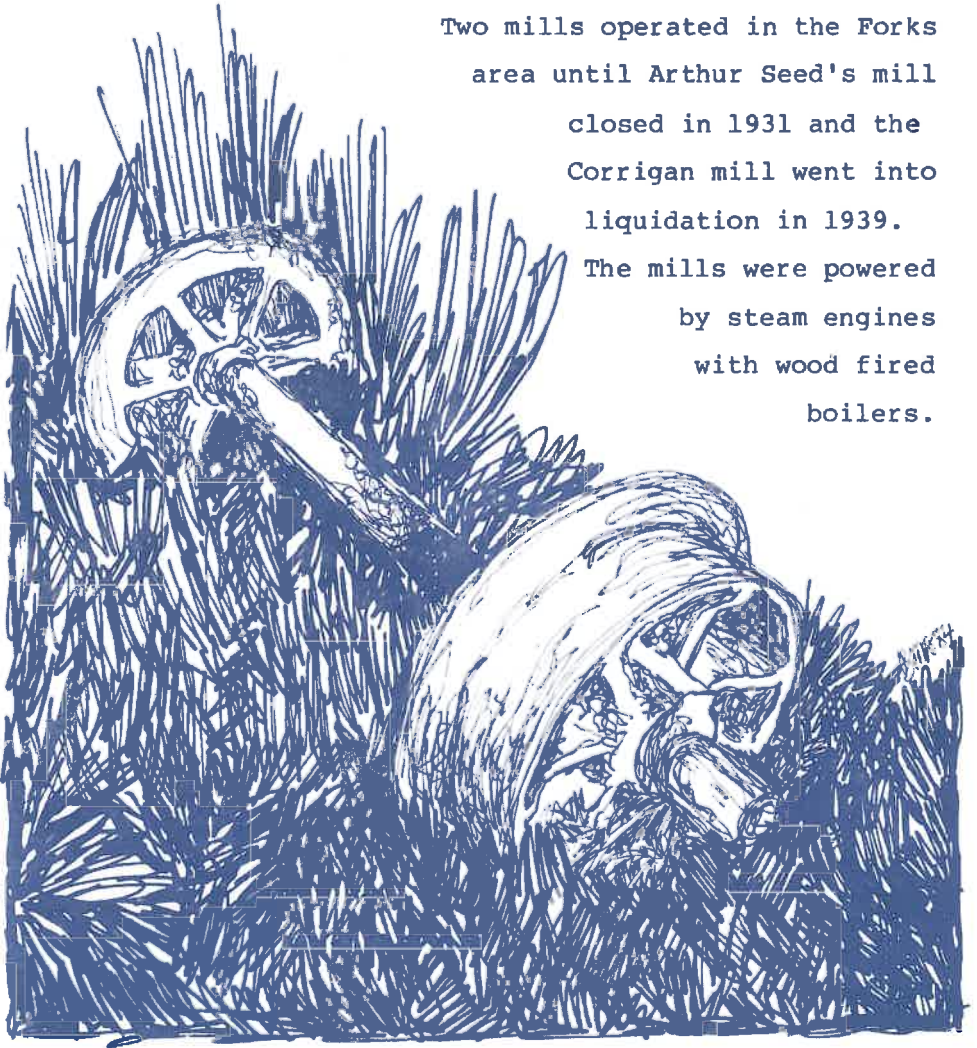


Seeds Mill, Waiotauru
(From a Seed family photo)

The Forks Settlers made their living by timber milling and farming. Some grazed small dairy herds on the river terraces. They milked their cows by hand, sending the cream to the dairy factory three times a week and feeding the skimmed milk to the pigs. During the summer the cream cans had to be put in the creek to keep cool.

Timber milling provided employment and income as well as clearing the farms of unwanted trees.

Two mills operated in the Forks area until Arthur Seed's mill closed in 1931 and the Corrigan mill went into liquidation in 1939. The mills were powered by steam engines with wood fired boilers.



Timber sawn at Corrigan's mill was winched across the Otaki on a cable and timber viaducts were built where the bush tramways crossed streams and gullies.

Viaducts were constructed and cuttings excavated to maintain an easy gradient for the tramways which were used to carry logs to the mill. The Sheridan Creek tramway crossed and recrossed the stream on thirteen viaducts. A stationary steam-driven log hauler operated from the end of the tramway and logs were hauled towards the mill on thirty chains of steel cable. As logging progressed the mill machinery was shifted and the tramways extended deeper into the bush.

During the Great Depression the settlers supplemented their meagre farm incomes by firewood cutting, post and batten splitting, and possum trapping. Firewood was given to fuel the ovens of the Otaki Bakery in return for bread.

A farmer who employed a man was paid seven shillings and sixpence a week by the government to subsidize the worker's keep. Eventually, despite government aid, it proved too expensive to employ men.

The transportation of cream and timber out of the Forks Settlement was an arduous and often dangerous task. River crossings had been made on packhorses before the Waitatapia and North Bank settlers built a succession of swingbridges. The washouts and slips during every storm swept away bridges and blocked access routes. "The Great Storm" of 1936 which devastated much of the bush, also destroyed the swingbridge to Corrigan's No. 2 mill and damaged many homes. The Tramping Club working parties spent two months clearing Fields Track after the storm.



Roaring Meg Bridge, 1939

The Roaring Meg Bridge was lost in an early 1950's flood and the essential link was broken ending dairy farming at the Forks.

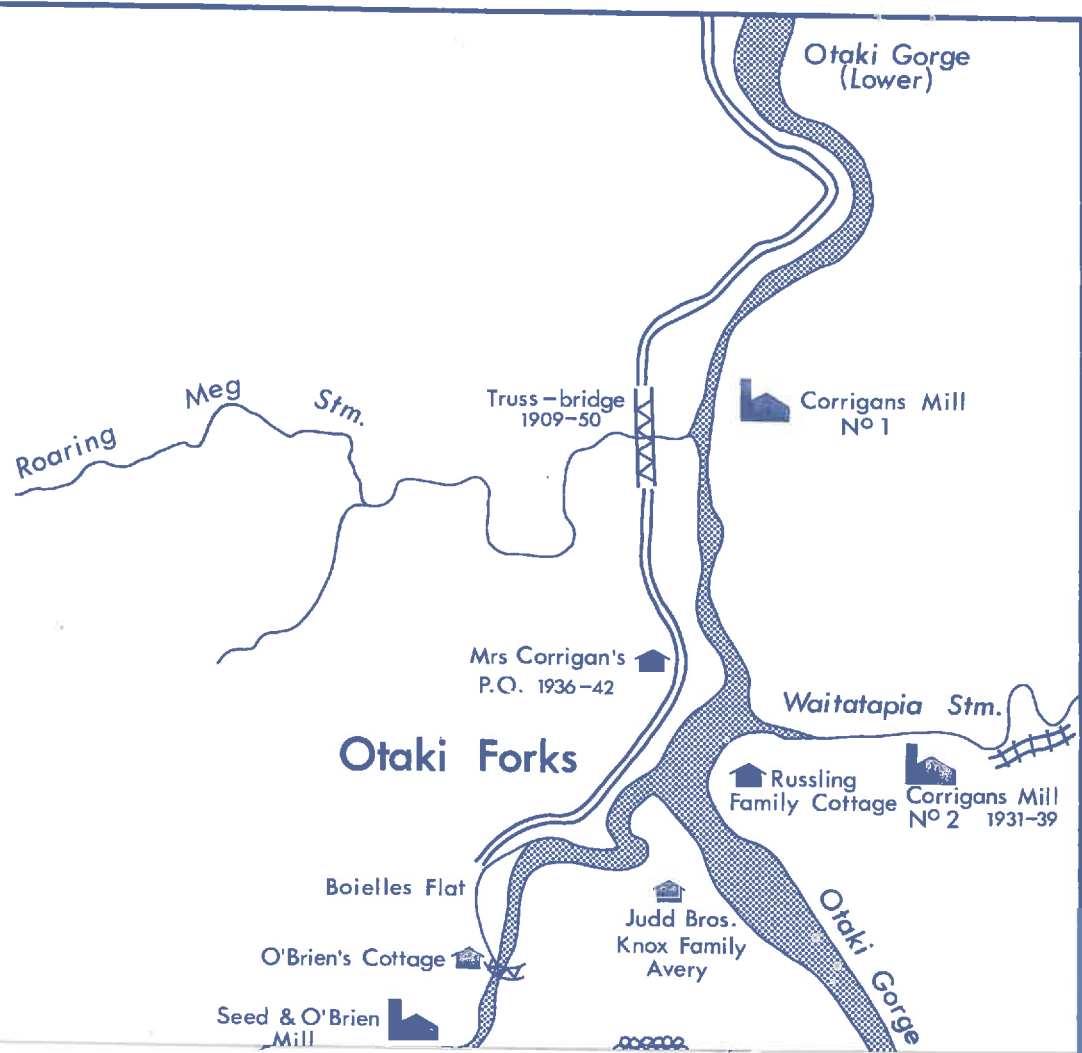
Despite the transportation and communication difficulties, education was not neglected nor were the settler's entirely isolated from their neighbours or those further afield. In 1916 telephone lines reached the Russling's house and later the Waiotauru mill. In 1935, one of the settlers, Ida Corrigan, ran a seven-phone manual exchange, the Otaki Forks Post Office and the school from here home. A building next to the school was the orphanage which contributed pupils and a small amount of money to the school. Further up the Gorge, by the Arcus family farmhouse was another school. The school teacher boarded with the Arcus family and taught seven or eight children.

However, the Forks Settlers didn't spend all their time working or battling the elements. Card and musical evenings whiled away winter nights. Fishing, camping, picnicking, and tramping were favourite leisure activities.

W H Field, Minister of Parliament for Otaki was an active conservationist and in 1906 made proposals to the Government for the preservation of all the bush in the Otaki Forks area. He also became the foremost campaigner of the Mt Hector Track Committee that had been formed in 1895 and whose aim was to form an alpine route to the Wairarapa. The track was first envisaged as a trade route with grazing for stock on alpine tussock, and later as a tourist attraction. W.H. Field and F. Vosseler formed the Tararua Tramping Club in 1919, with the intention of further developing the tracks, huts and scenic potential of the ranges.



Corrigans Post Office, Otaki Forks. 1939.



Otaki Forks

Otaki Gorge
(Lower)

Roaring
Meg
Stm.

Truss-bridge
1909-50

Corrigans Mill
No 1

Mrs Corrigan's
P.O. 1936-42

Waitatapia Stm.

Russling
Family Cottage
Corrigans Mill
No 2 1931-39

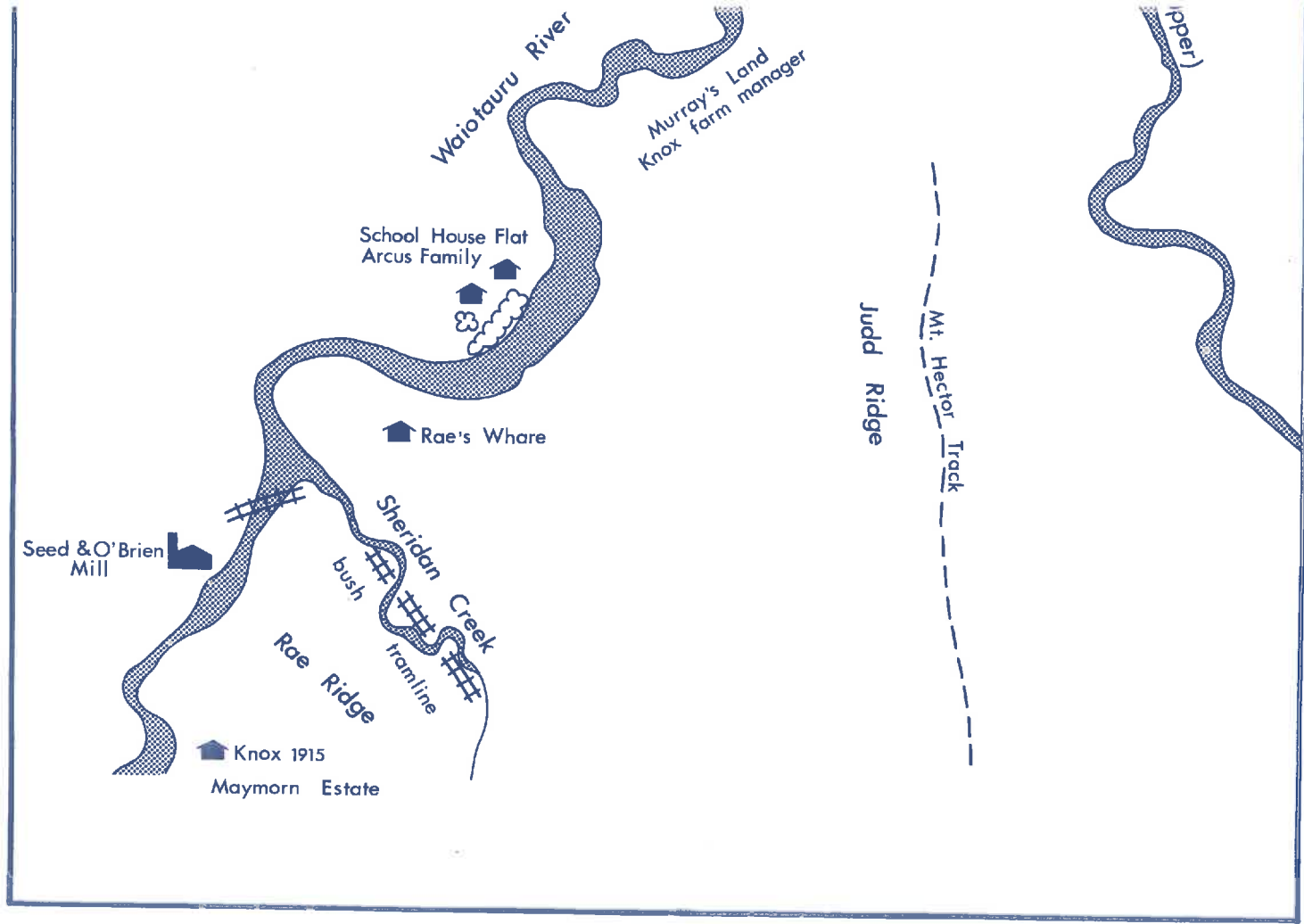
Boielles Flat

Judd Bros.
Knox Family
Avery

O'Brien's Cottage

Seed & O'Brien
Mill

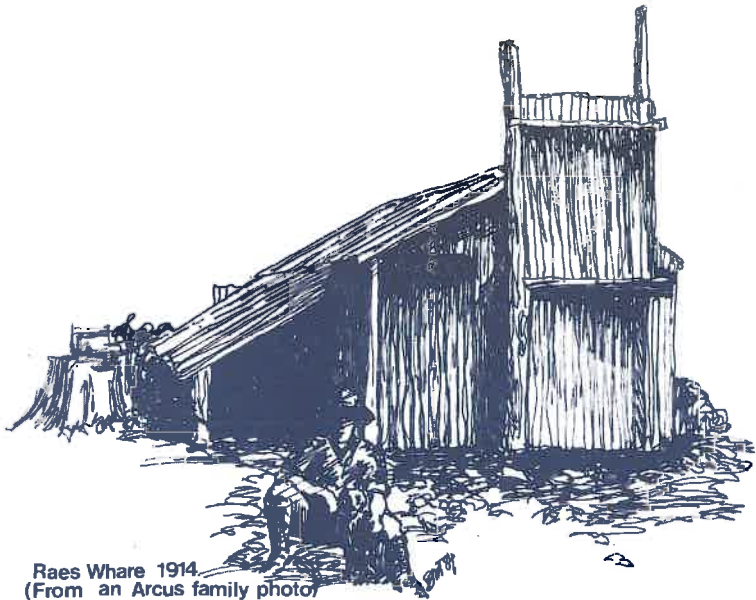
Otaki Gorge



A bushman named Joe Gibbs contracted with the Tararua Tramping Club to build Field Hut in 1924 and Kime Hut in 1930. Timber was pit sawn and carried by packhorses to the hut sites. From 1938 the Tararua Tramping Club leased a cottage at Otaki Forks from Alf Gibbons for one shilling per annum. This cottage had been the home of Mr O'Brien, the former manager of the Tararua Timber Company. In 1920, Annie Knox, the daughter of a Forks Settler was the first woman to cross the Tararua Ranges. In 1934, although skiing in the Tararua's was never as popular as tramping and has rarely occurred since, five clubs were represented by fifty skiers and spectators at the Kime Hut interclub sports.



'The Cottage', Otaki Forks 1940. (From a photo by D. Dyett.)

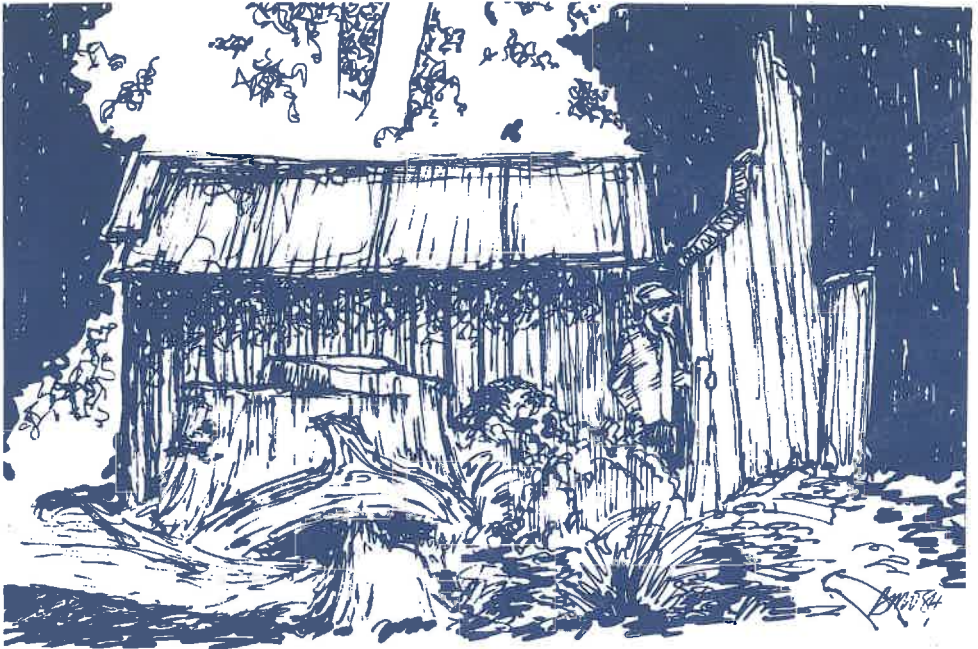


Raes Whare 1914
(From an Arcus family photo)

ABOUT THE PEOPLE

Arthur Seed was New Zealand manager for the Maymorn Estate Bush owned by the British-based Maymorn Company until 1914. He supervised their milling operations in the Upper Hutt Valley until the outbreak of World War 1 when the Maymorn Company ordered milling to cease.

Arthur Seed made frequent trips to his Wellington office, driving over the Paekakariki Hill in his Model T - "Tin Lizzie". His diaries record full days at the Forks - supervising mill, building and bush gangs, then a few hours fishing until dusk, followed by musical and card evenings. In 1915 Arthur Seed purchased Rae's farm and for six weeks every summer the family camped in the tin whare on their farm. The six bunks in the whare were made of chaff sacks slung between poles. Stores were packed in "Laurel Benzine" boxes. Marjorie and Dorothy helped their mother with the cooking, using a camp oven. They collected water from Sheridan's Creek in four-gallon kerosene cans and made tea in a black cast-iron kettle.



Te Moe Moe hut, built on Judd Ridge by the Mt Hector Track Committee.

Annie Knox the daughter of Arthur Seed's farm manager often joined the girls on adventures. The three Gibbons boys joined in also. They usually camped for a few weeks during the summer, fishing and eeling in the deep Waiotauru pools.

Their father Alf Gibbons was the constant fishing companion of Arthur Seed, who acted for the Acclimatisation Society and released fingerlings into the rivers. The two men built several fishing cottages on the Waiotauru. The last of these huts was known for the fish silhouette pictures pasted on the walls and a map of the Forks rivers with favourite fishing pools named.

Older trampers and settlers remember the Corrigan household as the centre of the Otaki Forks community during the late 1930's. Travellers were seldom allowed to pass without having a meal or at least a brew of tea.

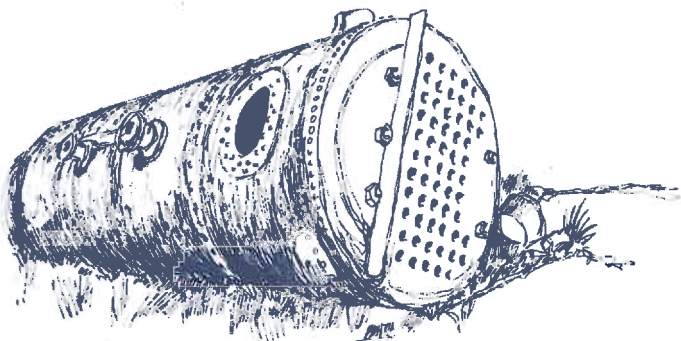
The hospitality the Forks settlers extended to visitors would surely have made the Arcus family's first few weeks at the Forks easier. They arrived at their farm on 12 June 1931. Five slips had to be negotiated on their journey up the Gorge with all their new neighbours helping. As heavy rain fell for the first two weeks of their time at the Forks, the family didn't even unpack until the weather cleared.



The Seed family & friends fishing at the forks about 1927
Arthur Seed's 'Tin Lizzie' in the background

WHAT'S LEFT TO SEE

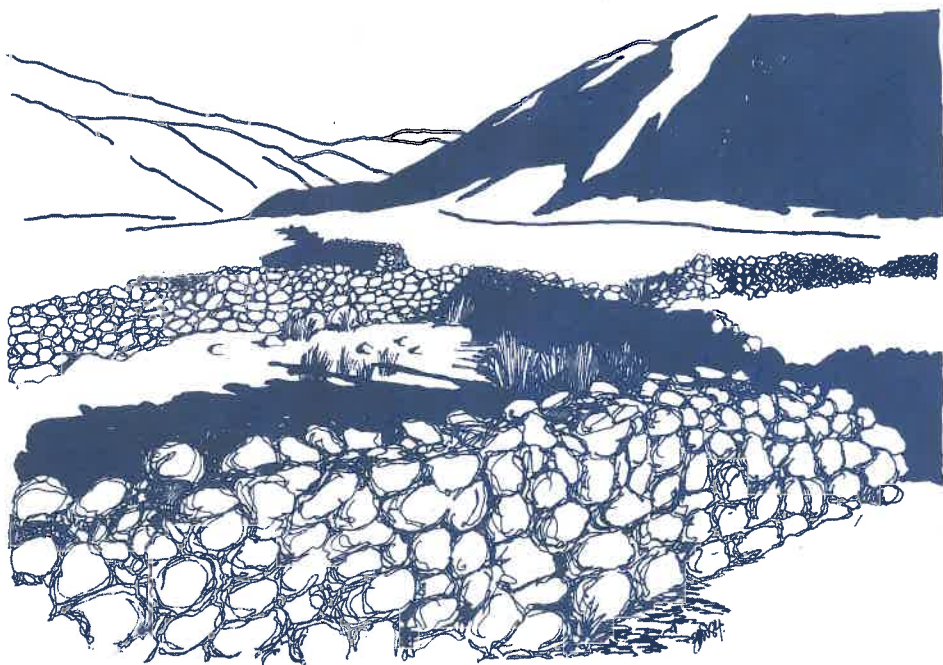
- Some remains of timber milling operations can be seen. Beside the Cypress Lawsoniana hedge there is part of an old cable and the trench gouged out by loads of timber. The boilers at Corrigan's No. 2 mill and at Arthur Seed's mill still rest on the final sites of these mills. The log haulers were also abandoned in the bush when the mills closed.



Waiotauru Mill Boiler, 1984

- At the School House Flat site there are four giant radiata pines planted by Mr Arcus and his father in 1932. Chimney bricks mark the house and schoolhouse sites. The miro tree stood in the front garden.
- The river on the upstream end of the terrace now flows where the cows used to graze on the fertile front paddock. The course of the river had altered considerably within living memory, washing away and reforming terraces.

- The Otaki Forks Post Office (Corrigan house site) was burned down in 1942. Only a few chimney bricks and a hand-built laundry tub from the time of the Depression mark the site.
- A small grove of exotic trees planted by Arthur Seed stands beside the concrete foundations of the Forks Mill. The most interesting of these is the beech tree Nothofagus dombeyi, a native of Chile and Argentina.
- The fig tree is spreading over the site of the Stone brothers' hut. They cut firewood here during the 1930's until they went to fight in World War II where they were both killed.



Old stone fencing remains



Conservator of Forests
Palmerston North
1984